

## NOTES ON SOME BRITISH INDIAN OTTERS, WITH DESCRIPTIONS OF TWO NEW SUBSPECIES.

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There has been greater confusion over the names and characters of the Otters of British India than of any other group of mammals inhabiting those districts of the Oriental Region. It is not my intention to enter fully in these matters in this paper; but it is necessary to explain that the three species admitted by Blanford, following Thomas, in the Appendix to his volume on the Mammals of British India, p. 602, 1891, are now referred to the three genera: *Lutra*, the so-called Common Otter, *Lutrogale*, the Smooth Otter, and *Amblonyx*, the Clawless Otter. They are found in India and Burma and far to the east and south-east of the latter country; but I am here principally concerned with those occurring in India itself.

An interesting point connected with their distribution in Hindostan has come to light from a study of the skins and skulls obtained by the collectors for the Bombay Mammal Survey. The three are found in the Himalayas and adjoining districts of Northern India and also in Southern India; but the only one that occurs over the whole of Central India as well is the Smooth Otter (*Lutrogale*). The distribution of the other two is discontinuous like the distribution of the Thar and the Yellow-throated Marten.

Not unexpectedly comparison between specimens from the Himalayas and the hills of Southern India shows that they can be sorted into distinguishable local races. In the case of *Lutra* names are available for both series, the South Indian form being *Lutra lutra nair*, Cuvier; and the best known of the three Himalayan races I admit, *Lutra lutra monticola* Hodgson, a larger, lighter coloured Otter. Nothing further need be said about these, except that Pohle gave the name *ceylonica* to Ceylonese representatives of *nair*. This is a synonym of *nair*, since the trivial difference on which Pohle relied breaks down both in Ceylonese and Indian skins.

The Southern Indian race of the Clawless Otter (*Amblonyx cinerea*) requires a new name. There are, in my opinion, three admissible races of this otter, namely (1) typical *cinerea*, described by Illiger in 1815, which is found in Java and other parts of South-eastern Asia, the type being from Batavia; (2) *concolor*, the type of the genus *Amblonyx*, which was described by Rafinesque in 1832 from the Garo Hills, Assam, and ranges from Upper Burma westwards at least to Kumaon, *indigitata* Hodgson and *sikimensis* Horsfield being synonyms of it; and (3) the new form described below.

It may be added that the northern Indian and Burmese race *concolor*—a name with which Blanford was unacquainted—differs from typical *cinerea* in having on the average a smaller, less muscularly moulded skull and the pale hue of the cheek and throat

more extensive posteriorly, and more sharply defined from the dark hue of the head and nape above it. The general colour of the upper side is drabby, greyish, earthy or rufous brown in fresh skins.

In addition to a number of old skins in the British Museum from Nepal (Hodgson), including the type of *indigitata*, from Bhutan (Pemberton) and Sadiya (Cockburn), I have seen several, comparatively fresh and unfaded, obtained by the Survey from the following localities:—Naini Tal (Crump); Tura in the Garo Hills, 1,400 ft. (Wells), of special interest as a toptype of *concolor*; Hot Springs, 2,400 ft. and Jowai, 4,500 ft. in the Jaintia Hills (Wells); Dabadubhi River, Golaghat, 250 ft. (Wells); Dikhu River in the Naga Hills, 2,000 ft. (Mills); Pwepi in the Chin Hills, 5,000 ft. (Shortridge); and during the current year, 1939, R. Kaulback has sent me half a dozen specimens from Sumprabum, 1,500 ft., Htingnau, 2,500 ft., Nchangyang, 1,500 ft. and Nanhkang 1,500 ft., all in 'The Triangle', Upper Burma, approximately 26° N. and 97° E.

***Amblonyx cinerea nirnai* subsp. nov.**

*Locality of the type.*—Virajpet (Virarajendrapet) in South Coorg, 3,000 ft.

*Distribution.*—The hill ranges of Southern India.

Distinguished from the foregoing race, *concolor*, by the noticeably darker hue of fresh skins, the upper side being very deep chocolate, almost blackish brown, without the paler greyish, drabby or rufous brown hue of the Northern Indian and Burmese form.

Before the Mammal Survey was started, this otter was represented in the British Museum by a couple of unsexed, undated and now faded skins, presented in 1867 by F. Day and merely labelled 'Madras', meaning somewhere in the Presidency. In addition to the type, an adult ♂ collected by Shortridge, the Survey secured specimens at the following localities: Haleri, North Coorg, 3,555 ft. (Graham), a specimen which I have not seen, the Palni Hills 5,800 ft. (McCann), and Ootacamund in the Nilgiri Hills (Gosse). The two from the last locality are a little paler than the type; but a series of four from the Nilgiri Hills recently sent to me by Major Phythian Adams resemble in their dark hue the type and the skin from the Palni Hills. This last-mentioned skin is exceptional amongst Indian skins in resembling Javan skins of typical *cinerea* in the colouring of the cheek and sides of the neck.

The sub-specific name chosen for this otter is, according to Blanford, Kanarese for the other South Indian Otter (*Lutra lutra nair*). But no doubt it applies to the Clawless Otter as well, since Shortridge found them fishing in the same waters in Coorg.

***Lutrogale perspicillata* Geoffroy.**

(*The Smooth-coated Otter*)

This large Otter, hitherto quoted in the literature on British Indian Mammals as *elliotti*, *macrodus*, *tarayensis* or *taraiyensis*,

*simung*, which belong to it, and as *barang*, which does not, takes the name above assigned to it for reasons to be fully explained elsewhere. It is the most widely distributed of the Oriental genera of the sub-family, ranging from Travancore and Sind in Western India as far east as Borneo. Until 1920 it was treated merely as a well-marked species of *Lutra*, and is still sometimes cited as such; but it differs profoundly from at all events all the Old World species of that genus in the structure of the skull and in some external features, notably, as Hodgson long ago pointed out, in having the end of the tail flattened instead of circular in section.<sup>1</sup> With the Clawless Otter (*Amblonyx*) it cannot be confused on account of the difference between them in the structure of the paws, the tail and some well defined characters in the skull and teeth.

The British Museum has a large collection of specimens, one from Sumatra, the country whence the type of *perspicillata* came, and many from the Malay Peninsula, Indo-China, Burma and India, mostly secured in the last two countries by the Bombay Mammal Survey as the familiar names of the collectors indicate. The localities are as follows: Pegu (Oates), West of Toungoo, 500 to 600 ft. and west of Kindat (Mackenzie); the Chin Hills (Shortridge); the 'Triangle', about 26° N. and 98° E., 1,500 and 3,000 ft., in Upper Burma (Kaulback); Sadiya, 500 ft., Golaghat, 250 ft. (Wells), the Chibi River, 1,500 ft. and the Dikhu River in the Naga Hills (Mills). The Burmese and Assamese specimens from these localities, although individually variable from drabby to very deep chocolate brown do not on the evidence seem distinguishable racially from those found further south which I assign to typical *perspicillata*. But skins from scattered localities in India proper, namely from Nepal (Hodgson), Mt. Abu, Rajputana (Impey), Damoh, 1,200 ft. (Crump), Ghazipur (Flower), Madras<sup>2</sup> (Jerdon), Trivandrum (Ferguson) and the Ankulam Lagoon, Travancore (Pillay) seem to be on the average more rufous or earthy brown than those from Assam and Burma. If further material establishes their racial distinctness, they will take the name *tarayensis* Hodgson, with *macrodon* Gray and *elliotti*, Anderson as synonyms.

There are, however, some additional specimens from the valley of the Lower Indus, mostly collected for the Survey by S. H. Prater which may be regarded as representing a distinct race.

<sup>1</sup> This peculiarity is very manifest on well preserved dried skins in which the terminal part of the tail appears to be keeled on each side.

<sup>2</sup> Skins and skulls of an adult ♂ and ♀ with this history are the cotypes of *macrodon* Gray which by some strange mistake he described as having come from South America. Perhaps stranger still was the failure to detect that mistake by the authors who subsequently handled the specimens and discussed the status of *macrodon*.

**Lutrogale perspicillata sindica** subsp. nov.

*Locality of the type.*—Chak in the Sukkur district of Sind.

*Distribution.*—The Indus valley at least from Bahawalpur southwards to Sind.

Distinguished on the average from representatives of *L. perspicillata* inhabiting the rest of Hindostan by its noticeably paler colour, in accordance no doubt with the more arid nature of its habitat, the general hue of the upper side being drabby, tawny or sandy brown instead of darker brown with a rusty tinge.

I have seen in all 7 skins of this otter from the Lower Indus. One labelled Sind, another Sukkur, Sind, were sent to the British Museum many years ago from the Karachi Museum. Two were collected by Prater at Sukkur and three at eastern Nara, Khairpur. None of the specimens is quite full grown as the skulls indicate. The Khairpur skins are a trifle darker than those from Sukkur, thus approaching those from other parts of Peninsular India; and a young specimen, about one-third grown, from Bahawalpur (J. Scully), is also darker, not very different from the type of *tarayensis*, Hodgson from the Nepal Tarai. Possibly young specimens of *sindica* are darker than adults.

Both Hume and Blanford who saw at least one example of this otter in Sind, thought it differed from the ordinary Indian form by its smaller size. This supposition is not borne out by the flesh-measurements Prater recorded or by the skulls he secured. His type, a young adult ♀, measured: head and body 25  $\frac{4}{5}$  in., tail 17  $\frac{4}{5}$  in.; hind foot 5  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. Its weight was 16 lb. Hodgson gave the dimensions of the head and body of Nepalese specimens of the Smooth Otter as from 26 to 28 in., the tail 16 in. and the weight from 16 to 20 lb. The largest British Indian specimen I have seen is one of Mackenzie's from west of Kindat, an adult ♂ with the head and body 29  $\frac{3}{5}$  in., the tail 17 in., the hind foot 5  $\frac{3}{5}$  in. and the weight 24 lb. Dunbar Brander recorded the weight of a large ♂, which he identified as the Common Otter (*Lutra vulgaris*), from Central India, as 22 lb.

Hume's account, quoted by Blanford, of this Otter being trained in Sind for capturing fish and porpoises was confirmed by Prater who wrote: 'Otters are not uncommon in the Indus and Eastern Nara. They are kept by the Muhanas (fishermen) who employ them as decoys for capturing dolphins (*Platanista gangetica*) and fish. Two or three tame otters are let into the river and food in the shape of fish or prawns is thrown to them, whereupon there ensues a great mewing and splashing, and the commotion attracts the fish which blunder into the nets prepared for them.'

The range of this Otter beyond the lower Indus is unknown. Conceivably it extends into Baluchistan and may indeed be the same as the otter recorded as *Lutra vulgaris* by Pitman who saw the tracks on the Tigris and Euphrates. (*Journ. Bomb. Nat. Hist. Soc.*, xxviii, 1922, reprinted p. 319 in 'A Survey of the Fauna of Iraq' published by the Society, 1923). But this Mesopotamian otter is more likely to be *Lutra lutra seistanica* Birula, which presumably was assigned to its correct genus.